



Decision Memo  
Elbow Insect and Disease Project  
USDA Forest Service  
Umatilla National Forest  
Walla Walla Ranger District  
Wallowa County, Oregon

## BACKGROUND

The Elbow Insect and Disease Project area is in Wallowa County, Oregon within portions of T 5N, R 41E, Sections 1- 4, 7-26, 14-23, 35 and 36; and T 5 N, R 42 E, Sections 6-10, and 17-19. The project area encompasses 15,585 acres within the Elbow Creek and Sickfoot Creek-Grande Ronde River sub watersheds (HUC12) located approximately 9 road miles west of Troy, Oregon. It is entirely within the Wallowa County Northern Wildland Urban Interface Zone. The project area is within an insect and disease treatment area designated by the Secretary under section 602 of Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA).

Widespread insect-related tree mortality and declining forest health is occurring within the Blue Mountains. Recent aerial surveys have shown the project area to contain the highest concentration of mortality on the Walla Walla Ranger District. Between early 2012 and 2016, the Blue Mountains experienced a protracted drought. While 2017 provided a brief reprieve, drought conditions resurfaced in 2018 and continued through early 2019. As a result, reduced availability of soil moisture has exacerbated the effect of density-related moisture demand thereby weakening hosts.

In the project area, mortality is occurring in all tree species and age classes. Primary mortality agents include the western pine beetle (*Dendroctonus brevicomis*) and fir engraver (*Scolytus ventralis*). Secondary mortality agents, including twig beetles (*Pityophthorus spp.*, *Pityogenes spp.*), Douglas fir beetles (*Dendroctonus pseudotsugae*), mountain pine beetles (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*), and wood borers (*Buprestidae spp.*, *Cerambycidae spp.*), have also been identified in the project area. Hot, dry conditions and overstocked stands have enabled trees to be more susceptible to these less aggressive insects. In many cases the mortality is occurring in larger, older, fire-resistant ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir.

The primary purpose of the Elbow Insect and Disease Project is to reduce the extent of, and increase resilience to, insect and disease infestation. To achieve this goal, proposed activities are designed to reduce stand density, competition and moisture stress. While treatments focus on reducing stand density, some treatments will also provide an opportunity to improve species composition by favoring more drought and fire tolerant species, such as ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*), western larch (*Larix occidentalis*), and Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*).

Approximately 2,600 acres were identified for treatment during scoping but only 2,502 acres are proposed for treatment under this Decision.

All proposed treatments are within Forest Plan management areas E-2 Timber and Big Game (1,791 effected acres), C-4 Wildlife Habitat (699 effected acres), and C-5 Riparian (12 effected acres).



The goal of E-2 management area is to emphasize production of wood fiber and encourage production of forage. The Forest Plan approves all project treatments in the E-2 management area. The project will maintain or improve timber production by thinning and reforesting stands in the project area. Thinning will also improve growth rates and promote increased vitality of individual trees resulting from decreased competition.

The goal of C-4 management area is to manage forest lands to provide high levels of potential habitat effectiveness for big game and other wildlife species with emphasis on size and distribution of habitat components. Unique wildlife habitats and key use areas will be retained or protected.

The goal of C-5 management area is to maintain or enhance water quality, and produce a high level of potential habitat capability for all species of fish and wildlife within the designated riparian habitat areas while providing for a high level of habitat effectiveness for big game.

See attached project area Map 1

## **DECISION**

This decision memo documents my decision and rationale for implementing the Elbow Insect and Disease Project. The Walla Walla Ranger District has reviewed and considered public comments received during the scoping period, and collaborated with affected Tribes, local county elected officials, state agencies, concerned special interest groups, and industry representatives. I have also considered the law, regulation and policy for each resource, as analyzed and compiled by resource specialists and disclosed in the project record.

Proposed treatments include thinning of overly dense stands by commercial timber harvest and non-commercial thinning to reduce stand density on 2,502 acres. Acres were removed from the original proposal to avoid impacts to sensitive plants, shallow soils, riparian habitats, wildlife corridors and heritage resources. Overstory, early seral tree species will be the preferred leave tree; however, other large diameter trees will be retained. Thinning will generally be from below except where no dominant trees exist. In this case, spacing of leave trees will meet the stand density objectives. Most of the treatment areas will be harvested using ground-based equipment, while some areas will be skyline yarded. Disposal of slash created by harvest operations will be accomplished by piling and burning of piles within units. Hazard and danger trees along haul routes will be mitigated. All work will be done utilizing existing road systems and the construction of approximately 6.53 miles of temporary roads; 4.37 miles of which are on existing templates and 2.16 are new construction. All temporary roads will be decommissioned as defined in the Forest Service Manual (FSM 7700-2000-1) after use. Hydrology Appendix A Project Design Criteria (PDC) describes management practices needed to restore temporary roads.

Hand thinning, hand piling and pile burning will occur within 232 acres of Type 4 Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA). These treatments meet the purpose and need of the project and are designed to fulfill riparian management objectives, see project record for design criteria specific to RHCA treatments.

No treatments are proposed within category 1, 2 or 3 RHCA, botanical sensitive species Special Management Areas (SMA) or Roadless Areas. All live trees greater than or equal to 21" DBH will be



retained for large snag recruitment, except for hazard trees (for timber operations) or danger trees (for roadways).

I have decided to implement the Elbow Insect and Disease Project as described in this decision memo and summarized in Table 1 and Map 2 (see attachment). As part of my decision, I will implement project-specific design elements including best management practices and PDCs listed in the project record to minimize the effects of management activities.

Table 1 Summary of Treatments and Connected Actions

Vegetation Treatment	Acres	Harvest System	
		Ground Based (acres)	Cable (acres)
Improvement Cutting Dry	665	663	3
Improvement Cutting Mixed	433	412	21
Improvement Cutting Moist	1,163	1,109	54
<b>Total Acres of Commercial Thinning</b>	<b>2,262</b>	<b>2,184</b>	<b>78</b>
Post Commercial Thinning	2,262		
Non-commercial Thinning Wildlife Corridor	8		
Non-commercial Hand Thinning Type 4 RHCA	232		
<b>Total Treated Acres</b>	<b>2,502</b>		
<b>Fuels Treatment</b>	<b>Acres</b>		
Mechanical Piling and Pile Burning of Activity Fuels	2,270		
Hand Piling and Pile Burning of Activity Fuels	232		
<b>Roads</b>	<b>Miles</b>		
Maintenance Level 1 roads to be reopened/used/ returned to storage	37.89	Total Temp Roads = 6.53 miles	
Newly Constructed Temp roads	2.16		
Existing Template Temp roads	4.37		

## DECISION RATIONALE

My decision to implement this project is consistent with the scale of effects disclosed for actions which do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment and therefore do not require further analysis in either an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable categories of actions are established by Title VI, Section 603 of the amended Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) (U.S.C. 659 1b; FSH 1909.15 32.3(3)): *insect and disease projects designed to reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, insect and disease infestation.*

This project is within a treatment area designated under HFRA Section 602(b). The project is also within the WUI boundary established within the Wallowa County Community Wildfire Protection Plan. Retention of old-growth and large trees, as appropriate for the forest type, will be maximized to promote stands that are resilient to insects and disease.

Treatments focus on areas currently experiencing insect and disease infestations, to include areas susceptible to future infestation. All treatments focus on reducing stand densities and competition, thereby increasing growing space, available moisture, and light and nutrients. Density reduction ultimately increases resilience to insects and disease outbreaks and improves tree vitality.

This project, including project-specific design features, was reviewed by specialists (see Project Record) and was found compliant with the Umatilla National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

A strategy was developed to identify and notify parties that might be interested in this project. In addition to regular updates on our Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA), regular updates provided to the counties and scheduled Program of Work discussion with the treaty tribes, we provided scoping letters to Tribes, state and federal agencies, local interest groups, self-identified interested parties, and all known adjacent landowners. A legal notice was also published in the East Oregonian (the Umatilla National Forest paper of record), and a news release sent to smaller local papers. Scoping notices were also posted on the Umatilla National Forest Facebook and Twitter accounts.

During the scoping period, we provided two additional opportunities to collaborate on the project design. An open house at the Walla Walla Ranger District office on Monday October 28 was attended by one member of the public, and a representative from Greater Hells Canyon Council. A field trip on Tuesday, October 29, 2019 was attended by a member of the public, and private industry and Oregon Department of Forestry representatives.

## **COLLABORATIVE INPUT**

As required, the Forest Service provided opportunities to collaborate on project design. Comments and suggestions were received from interested persons, groups, and other government entities and were generally mixed. Overall, two were opposed, two were indifferent, and four were supportive. Comments reflected concern with use of the specific CE authority, collaboration, temporary road building, treatment effectiveness on the desired outcome, wildlife habitat, and RHCA treatment. Full text comments are available for review on our website.

Many of the comments and suggestions submitted during the collaboration process were already being addressed in the resource analysis and project design as directed by the Forests Plan. These include, but are not limited to, soils and riparian areas, wildlife habitat and cover, sensitive species, logging systems, and recreation use.

We received suggestions for project design changes during collaboration that included: place temp roads on existing templates, do not use temp roads, do not treat within previously untreated areas, and no logging in RHCA's or other areas with old growth characteristics or specific habitats. This project does not include harvesting in any areas designated as old growth. All live trees 21" DBH and greater are being retained to meet the Forest Plan requirements for late old structure (LOS). Any treatment in RHCA 4 will be limited to hand thinning to meet project objectives. Overall, stands were selected to reduce density and mitigate current and future insect and disease outbreaks. Some temporary roads are necessary to meet those objectives. Temporary roads will be decommissioned according to guidelines.



Some comments outlined recommended silvicultural practices and prescriptions. These recommendations were taken into consideration and used to help guide prescriptions and residual stocking by forest type. I have determined that the planned silvicultural treatments are necessary in these areas to meet the purpose and need. Additionally, project design criteria and meeting Forest Plan standards and guidelines will mitigate potential effects to riparian areas and wildlife from these treatments.

## EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

Based on the project record and the following narrative I find there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I considered resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist.

- ***Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for federal listing, or Forest Service sensitive species.***
  - **Plants**

The biological evaluation process for plants was completed by a journey-level botanist. Botanical surveys were conducted in all activity units in 2020. Since there is no habitat for any Federally listed, proposed, or candidate species in the Elbow project area, this project will have “No effect” to any federally listed species. All documented sensitive plant populations will be protected from ground disturbing activities during project implementation. Therefore, implementation of this project will have “no impact” to any documented sensitive plant populations in the project area.
  - **Wildlife**

A biological evaluation has been prepared for the Elbow Insect and Disease project. There are no effects to any threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate wildlife species or their habitat. Impacts to Regional Forester Sensitive Species will not cause a trend towards federal listing and are consistent with guidelines of this Categorical Exclusion.
  - **Fish**

A determination of *No Effect* was made for federally listed fish species and their Designated Critical Habitat (DCH). A determination of *Will Not Adversely Affect* was made for Essential Fish Habitat for Salmon. Additionally, the Elbow Insect and Disease Project *Will Not Impact* Region 6 Regional Forester’s sensitive species or their habitats.
- ***Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.***
  - **Floodplains**

Floodplains and flood prone areas occur along all streams throughout the project area. All floodplains would retain RHCA buffers where harvest and equipment entry would be restricted. Model results indicate that the proposed action would not exceed thresholds which could result in increased water and sediment yield when PDCs are properly implemented, monitored and maintained. Therefore, no changes to floodplains would result. Beneficial effects to floodplain function as a result of planned treatments may be realized when treatments restore upland forest resiliency.

- **Wetlands-**  
Proposed treatments in RHCAs associated with wetlands are consistent with Executive Order 11988 and Federal Regulation 43 FR 6030. No changes to wetlands would occur when PDCs are implemented.
- **Municipal Watersheds**  
Extraordinary circumstances are not present within the project area.
- ***Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas.***  
Extraordinary circumstances are not present within the project area.
- ***Inventoried roadless areas***  
The Grande Ronde Roadless Area is present within the project area; however, no treatment is proposed within its boundary. The project will not affect roadless area characteristics.
- ***Research natural areas***  
There are no Research Natural Areas in the project area.
- ***American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites***  
The proposed undertaking takes place within and adjacent to areas of special cultural significance to both the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) and the Nez Perce Tribe. Consultation with heritage staff from the CTUIR and the Nez Perce tribe began during the project development phase. Identified religious or cultural site information will be kept confidential and design criteria will be implemented to ensure these properties will not be affected.
- ***Archeological sites, or historic properties or areas***  
Incorporation of project design criteria will be implemented to ensure no historic properties will be affected.

## FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

The decision is consistent with the Umatilla National Forest Land Management Plan, the Endangered Species Act of 1973 as amended, Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) of 2000, Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Clean Air Act, Executive Order 11988, and Executive Order 11990 (project record).

There is no prime farmland or rangeland within the project area. Implementation of this decision is not expected to have any disproportional effects on consumers, civil rights, minority groups, women, or low-income people because there will be no change in the long-term use of the area for these populations (Executive Order 12898). The decision will not have unusual energy requirements and will not change public health and safety.



## ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

There is no administrative review process for categorically excluded projects.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Project layout is expected to begin the spring of 2021. Timber harvest may begin in the summer of 2021 and continue through the fall of 2024.

## CONTACT PERSON

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**Aaron Gagnon**  
**Walla Walla District Ranger**

11 MAR 2021  
**Date**

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R. 40 E.

R. 41 E.

R. 42 E.

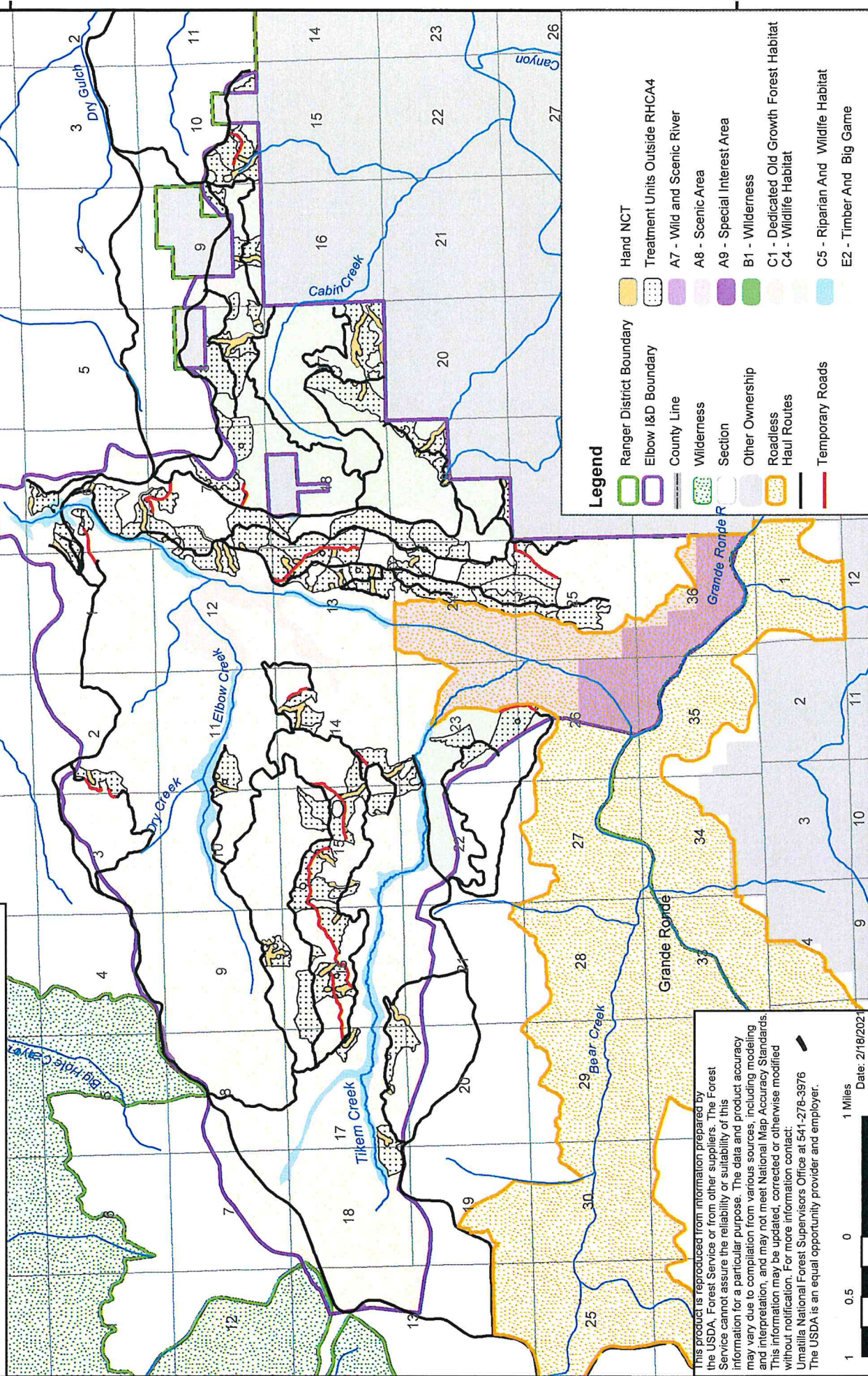
# Elbow I&D Project

Map 1- Treatment Units and Management Areas within the Elbow I&D Project Area

1.6 N.

1.5 N.

1.4 N.



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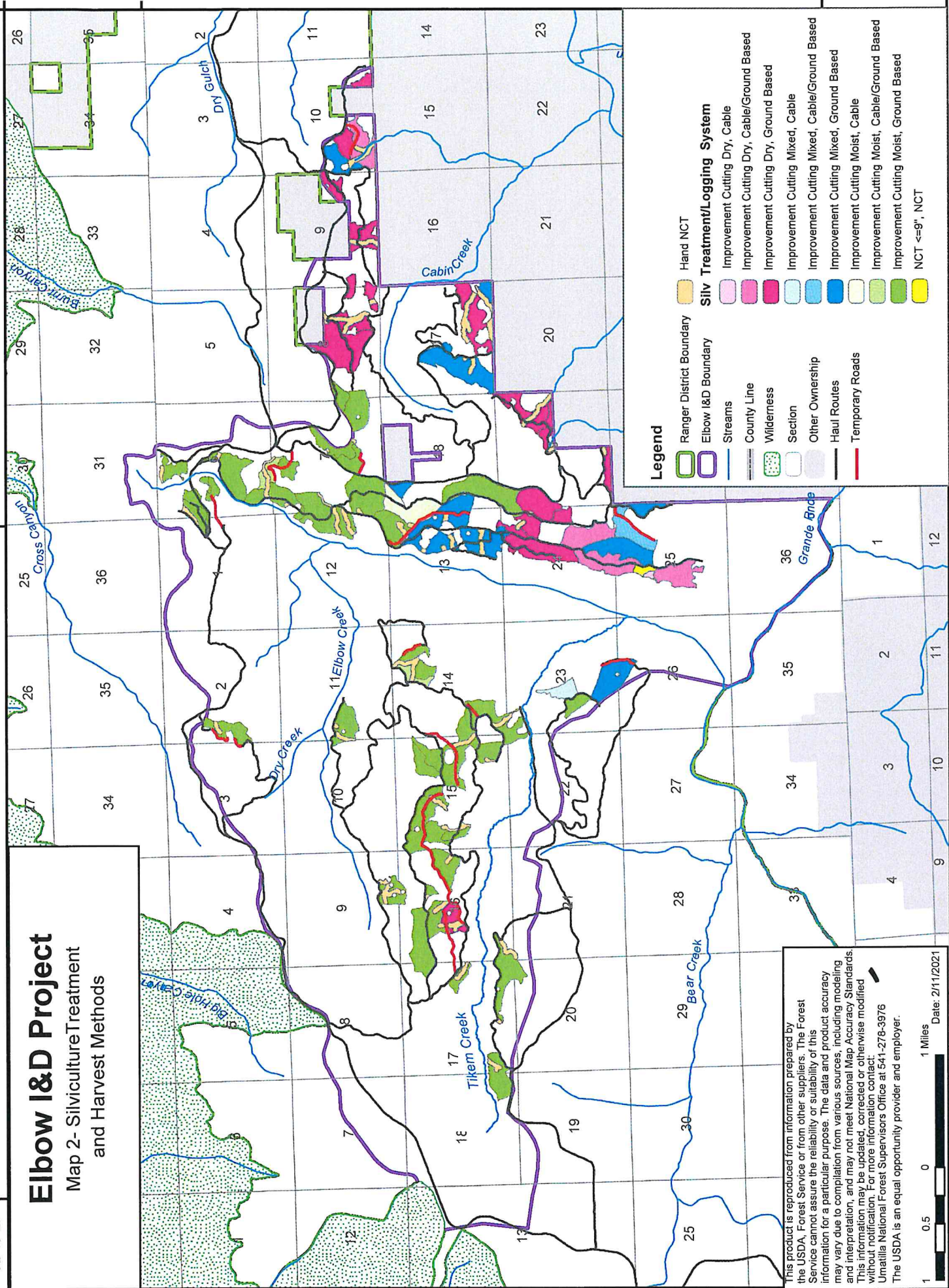
# Elbow I&D Project

Map 2- Silviculture Treatment and Harvest Methods

T. 6 N.

T. 5 N.

T. 4 N.



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